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WITHOUT FEAR OR FAVOUR

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Janakpur Jomsom

Trump transformed US Supreme Court. Now justices could decide his future

ASSOCIATED PRESS
WASHINGTON, DEC 21

Donald Trump touts his transformation of the US Supreme Court as one of his presidency's greatest accomplishments. Now his legal and political future may lie in the hands of the court he pushed to the right.

With three Trump-appointed justices leading a conservative majority, the court is being thrust into the middle of two cases carrying enormous political implications just weeks before the first votes in the Iowa caucuses.

The outcomes of the legal fights could dictate whether the Republican presidential primary front-runner stands trial over his efforts to overturn the 2020 election and whether he has a shot to retake the White House next November.

"The Supreme Court now is really in a sticky wicket, of historical proportions, of constitutional dimensions, to a degree that I don't think we've ever really seen before," said Steve Vladeck, a law professor at the University of Texas at Austin.

Trump's lawyers plan to ask the Supreme Court to overturn a decision on Tuesday barring him from Colorado's ballot under Section 3 of the 14th Amendment, which prohibits anyone who swore an oath to support the Constitution and then "engaged in insurrection" against it from holding office. The Colorado Supreme Court ruling is the first time in history the provision has been used to try to prohibit someone from running for the presidency.

"It's a political mess the Supreme Court may have a hard time avoiding," said Michael Gerhardt, a University of North Carolina law professor.

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People are seen boating on Phewa Lake in Pokhara on Thursday.

POST PHOTO: DEEPAK KC

Amid surge in India, Nepali officials ask at-risk groups to get Covid shots

Covax facility has supplied 750,000 doses of Pfizer-BioNTech bivalent vaccine.

ARJUN POUDEL
KATHMANDU, DEC 21

As India reports a surge in new cases of Covid-19 and the confirmation of a new JN.1 strain, the Ministry of Health and Population has asked vulnerable groups to get the Covid-19 vaccine.

Pregnant women, those having compromised immunity, people suffering

from chronic diseases and those above 55 years of age have been designated vulnerable groups for vaccination, officials said.

"At present, Covid-19 vaccine is being administered from Sukraraj Tropical and Infectious Disease Hospital in Kathmandu Valley," said Dr Abhayan Gautam, chief of the Immunisation Section of the Family Welfare Division of the

Department of Health Services.

"People of vulnerable groups can get inoculated if they did not get it in the past six months."

The health ministry recently rolled out 750,000 doses of the Pfizer-BioNTech bivalent vaccine supplied by the COVAX facility, the United Nations-backed international vaccine sharing scheme.

>> Continued on page 3

Exploitative lending practices continue to plague the poor

Around 135 loan shark victims gathered in Bardibas to protest against microfinance firms and loan sharks.

SUNITA BARAL
MAHOTTARI, DEC 21

Hira Devi Mandal took a loan of Rs1.5 million from Rajshree Finance in Janpur for her two daughters' weddings three years ago. She pledged her 2.16 kattha of land as collateral with the finance company.

Her debt now adds up to Rs1.7 million.

The finance company informed Mandal that the land she had pledged as collateral was now up for auction as she failed to repay the loan instalments as promised.

"We paid a couple of instalments, but soon we couldn't afford to pay anymore. The loan I had taken for my daughters' weddings was spent putting together their dowries and on other wedding arrangements," said Mandal. "As we were having trouble paying the loan back, my two sons decided to go abroad to earn money to pay off the debt. But we had to take another loan of Rs600,000 from a loan shark to facilitate their departure."

Four and a half years ago, Dinesh Prasad Yadav from ward 5 of Samsi Rural Municipality also borrowed Rs2.5 million from different loan sharks for the marriage of his two daughters. He now owes Rs3.3 million after failing to pay his instalments on time.

Yadav sold 4.5 kattha of his land to pay off his debt, but the

loan sharks insist that another Rs3.3 million in debt remain.

"The creditors told me that it would be easy to pay them back. They said I could sell my land when the time comes, and my loan would be paid," said Yadav. "But now they tell me that I still owe them money."

Loan-sharking was criminalised by amending the National Criminal Procedure Act.

Yadav has joined others like him who have fallen into the debt trap of loan sharks. "I have been protesting alongside other victims of loan sharks, finance and microfinance companies," he said.

>> Continued on page 2



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5 killed after tractor carrying quake relief topples over

WEST RUKUM: A tractor carrying relief and construction materials for earthquake victims met with an accident in Aathbiskot Municipality on Wednesday night, killing five people and injuring nine others.

Man arrested with brown sugar

BUTWAL: A suspected drug smuggler was arrested from ward 8 of Siddharthanagar Municipality in Rupandehi district on Thursday.

APF patrol recovers drugs from Koshi riverbank

SAPTARI: A patrolling team of the Armed Police Force stationed at Hanumannagar Kankali Municipality recovered 240 kilograms of marijuana from the Koshi River bank in ward 8 of the municipality on Wednesday night.

Nepal, Sri Lanka discuss Saarc, Bimstec, and ties

First joint commission meeting also explores possibility of establishing air link between Colombo and Lumbini.

POST REPORT KATHMANDU, DEC 21

Nepal and Sri Lanka on Thursday discussed strengthening bilateral ties as well regional forums like the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (Saarc) and the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (Bimstec).

The meeting was co-chaired by Foreign Minister NP Saud and his Sri Lankan counterpart Ali Sabry, who arrived in Kathmandu on Wednesday.

An MoU on Cooperation in the Fields of Science, Technology and Innovation was signed between the two countries, after the talks in the presence of Foreign Ministers.

"Besides other bilateral issues and matters, we discussed strengthening Saarc and Bimstec," foreign minister Saud said after the meeting.

Both Nepal and Sri Lanka are members of Saarc and Bimstec, and Nepal has been chairing Saarc since the last summit meeting in 2014. Although Bimstec is functioning effectively, Saarc has struggled to gain momentum due to lack of political will among member states and longstanding rivalry between India and Pakistan.

"During the meeting, we reviewed our bilateral ties and matters related to trade, investment, connectivity, tourism, culture, education, defense, and immigration, among others," said Saud.

According to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, enhancing trade and investment, increasing air connectivity, exchange programmes in culture, tourism and education sectors, strengthening regional cooperation

including Saarc and Bimstec processes and cooperation in multilateral forums are some of the major agenda items discussed during the meeting.

Stating that the operation of the Kathmandu-Colombo air connection is encouraging, the two sides also discussed the possibility of establishing an air link between Colombo and Lumbini. The two ministers also discussed the potential transfer of three Nepali nationals imprisoned in Sri Lanka, said the ministry.

Also, a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) on cooperation in the fields of science, technology and innovation is set to be signed, the ministry added.

"We also discussed cooperating in the United Nations and other multilateral forums," said Saud, adding, "Matters related to strengthening Saarc and Bimstec and finding a common position among member states were also discussed."

The Nepali delegation comprised Foreign Minister Saud, Foreign Secretary Sewa Lamsal, Nepali Ambassador to Sri Lanka Basudev Mishra, and senior officials from ministries of commerce, home and foreign affairs. Likewise, the Sri Lankan delegation included Ambassador Sudarshana Pathirana, and senior foreign ministry officials.

While addressing the media after the meeting, Sri Lankan foreign minister Sabry stated that both sides discussed potential cooperation in education, health, employment, and tourism. He emphasised the need to focus on various programmes within Saarc and Bimstec.

He said: "Nepal and Sri Lanka are very close friends and we have been friends for a long time. We have been cooperating with each other on many issues. Now we are advancing our cooperation to further expand our relationship. We will cooperate in many fields including education, health, employment, and tourism."

The Sri Lankan foreign minister also called on the Prime Minister Pushpa Kamal Dahal. Sabry also said the Sri Lankan government would take a special initiative to encourage Sri Lankan citizens to visit Nepal. "We hope Nepal will also make a similar kind of appeal to its citizens. We had a very cordial meeting today and we held important talks to expand our bilateral ties," said the Sri Lankan foreign minister.

Tarai poor unite against predatory lending by individuals, institutions



Victims of exploitative lending discuss their protest strategies at a meeting organised by the Committee to Protest Against Microfinance Institutions Nepal in Bardibas of Mahottari district in south-central Nepal on Tuesday.

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

"I realised that there are many uneducated people like me who were misled by the creditors."

Shilam Yadav, president of the Committee to Protest Against Microfinance Institutions, Mahottari, said that the moneylenders, loan sharks and financial institutions target and lure the poor and needy into taking loans from them and then trap them in the vicious loan cycle.

"Even registered institutions entice the poor and uneducated people to take huge loans knowing that they would not be able to pay back on time. The goal of these institutions is to expropriate their assets," said Shilam.

On Tuesday, around 135 loan shark victims gathered in Bardibas to protest against finance corporations and loan sharks.

Yuvaraj Rasaili, the central president of the Committee to Protest Against Microfinance Institutions, Nepal, said financial institutions and loan sharks target the most vulnerable and take advantage of their limited knowledge of the financial system.

"The financial institutions engage in usurious lending. Loan sharks have been found to prepare documents showing that the borrowers had taken more loans than they had borrowed," said Rasaili. "Such malpractices must be put to an end."

The government in April formed an inquiry commission to address loan sharking problems and to facilitate negotiations. It submitted its report to the government earlier in December. After collecting complaints, the commission had formed a task force in each district under an assistant chief district officer in order to settle disputes through compromise decrees.

On July 28 this year, the practice of loan sharking was criminalised by amending the National Criminal Procedure (Code) Act 2017.

According to the inquiry commission, as of December, it settled as many as 5,188 of a total 27,582 complaints through compromise. The Madhesh Province districts—Saptari, Bara, Parsa, Dhanusha, Rautahat, Siraha, Mahottari, and Sarlahi—have the highest number of loan sharking cases in the country.

As per the new legal provisions, loan sharking means compelling victims to sign a promissory note without any money being lent, mentioning higher amounts in the documents than what was lent, and preparing a promissory note by adding interest to the principal amount before lending.

Other punishable offences include not providing receipts for the amounts paid by the borrowers, threatening

and exploiting borrowers, and unlawfully seizing their properties.

The new law brought into force in July criminalises the practice of lending money for interest through unfair transactions.

Under this law, offenders are subject to jail terms of up to seven years along with fines as high as Rs70,000 for loan sharks.

As per the law, if a loan shark has confiscated cash or property of the borrower, an equivalent sum or property should be returned to the borrower. "If it is proved that the ownership of fixed assets of the borrower has been transferred in the name of a person nominated by the loan shark, such transfer becomes null and void," the law states.

Mandal's sons who left for foreign employment a few months ago now find themselves in dire financial stress on foreign shores. Although Mandal is now aware of what the law promises those like her who have fallen into debt cycles, she is struggling to take her house back from her creditors.

"Both the finance company and the loan sharks have been hounding me for repayment. They even kicked us out of our house," Mandal told the Post. "I don't know what to do now. My sons have not been able to send me money. I feel trapped and helpless."

महत्त्वपूर्ण कागजातहरू हराएको सूचना
भक्तपुर-१२, चितवन निवासी सवित्री जोशी (राजाज्योती) को नाममा रहेको स्थावक रहेको टाक्सक्रिड, +२ को टाक्सक्रिड, वारिडिक प्रमाणपत्रहरू, एसएलसीको मार्केसिड तथा प्रमाणपत्रहरू, जिप्रका, विद्वानबाट जारी भएको नाप्रपन ५९६६३९४८ को सक्कल नागरिकताको प्रमाणपत्र मिति २०७० साल कार्तिक १४ गते बिराजमोड नारायणमोदतर्फ जाने क्रममा हराएको हुँदा पाउनुहुने महानुभावले मोबाईल नं. ९८४३३००००० वा नजिकको प्रहरी कार्यालयमा सम्पर्क गरिदिनुहुन अनुरोध छ।

महत्त्वपूर्ण कागजातहरू हराएको सूचना
भक्तपुर-१२ निवासी सन्तोष राजमण्डारीको नाममा रहेको +२ को रजिष्ट्रेशन नं. ६९३५०९०५९ रहेको टाक्सक्रिड, वारिडिक प्रमाणपत्रहरू, एसएलसीको सिमोल नं. ०३४६०८२४४ रहेको मार्केसिड तथा प्रमाणपत्रहरू, जिप्रका, विद्वानबाट जारी भएको नाप्रपन ९४८०७/०६० को सक्कल नागरिकताको प्रमाणपत्र र राहदानी नं. ९०४३३०९५ को सक्कल राहदानी। मिति २०७०/०९/२४ गते बिराजमोड नारायणमोदतर्फ जाने क्रममा हराएको हुँदा पाउनुहुने महानुभावले मोबाईल नं. ९८४३३००००० वा नजिकको प्रहरी कार्यालयमा सम्पर्क गरिदिनुहुन अनुरोध छ।

मोटरसाइकल हरायो
मिति २०८०/०५/०२ गते बिहान ९९:४० बजे एकान्तकुनाबाट बा.प्र. ०२ ०४६ प १४६८ नं. को १५००० कालो रालो रंगको पल्लर मोटरसाइकल हराएको हुँदा पाउनु हुने महानुभावहरूले फोन नं. ९८४३३२३५६७ वा नजिक को प्रहरी चौकीमा बुझाईदिनु हुन अनुरोध गर्दछु।
नाम: राजेश कुमार कटायत
इजिन नं.: DHXPPC59628
चिप नं.: MD2A11CX4PPC28551

Ministry of Water Supply Kathmandu Upatyaka Khanepani Limited, (KUKL) Board Project Implementation Directorate (PID) Anamnagar, Kathmandu Request for Expression of Interest for Design, Supervision and Contract Management Consultant (DSC/WW/03) (Publication Date: 22 December 2023) 1. Government of Nepal (GoN) has received a Loan from the Asian Development Bank (ADB) for Kathmandu Valley Wastewater Management Project and intends to apply part of this fund to eligible payments under the Contract for which this Expression of Interest is invited for International Consulting Services.

Bagmati Province Government Ministry of Water Supply, Energy & Irrigation Water Supply & Sanitation Division No. 1, Makawanpur Invitation for Bids Date of Publication: 2080-09-06 (2023 December 22) 1. Water Supply & Sanitation Division No. 1, Makawanpur (WSSDI Makawanpur) invites following bids. Table with 7 columns: S. N., Contract Identification Number, Description of Work, Estimated Amount with VAT (NRs.), Bid Security Amount (NRs.), Bid Validity / Bid Security Validity Period, Price of Bid Document (NRs.).

RPP's double standard plays out in Koshi Province

After announcing protests against federalism and secularism, the pro-monarchy force claims Speaker position in the province.

POST REPORT
KATHMANDU, DEC 21

The Rastriya Prajatantra Party on Tuesday announced nationwide protests against secularism, federalism and republicanism, the major political achievements of the 2006 people's movement institutionalised in the 2015 Constitution of Nepal.

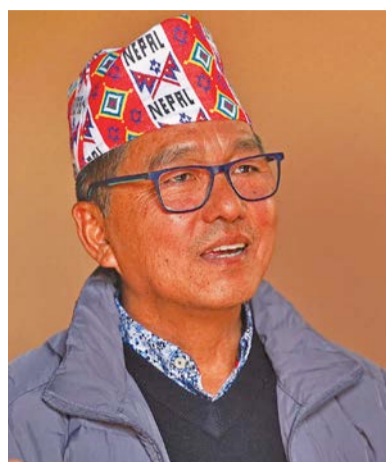
A three-day central committee meeting of the right-wing party, which is the fourth-largest in the federal parliament, announced that it would start the 'Mechi-Mahakali unity march' and Kathmandu-centric demonstrations for a month from mid-February demanding that federal structures be scrapped and Nepal reinstated as a Hindu kingdom. While the party's central leadership was busy devising a strategy for the protest, its provincial leadership in Koshi had been in dialogue to secure the Speaker's position in the provincial assembly.

The Nepali Congress-led ruling alliance has offered the Speaker's position to the RPP in exchange for its support to the government. "The ruling alliance has offered the Speaker's position to our party," Bhakti Sitaula, the RPP parliamentary party leader in the province, told the Post. "We are ready to accept the position if all the parties unanimously make the offer."

With 40 seats, the CPN-UML is the largest party in the assembly. The Congress has 29 seats, the CPN (Maoist Centre) 12, the RPP six, the CPN (Unified Socialist) four, and the Janata Samajbadi Party has one seat.

Kedar Karki was appointed chief minister as per Article 168(5) of the constitution, under which a provincial assembly member can claim the chief ministerial position by producing the support of the majority members. This is the last option for the formation of a government.

The ruling alliance has 47 seats in the 93-strong provincial assembly. However, it will not be possible to prove the number in the floor test



POST PHOTO: ANGAD DHAKAL
RPP President Rajendra Lingden

given the deputy Speaker abstains from the voting process and the senior most member from the alliance needs to chair the assembly. The previous Uddhav Thapa government fell due to the same reason.

Experts say RPP's dual game is an example of lack of political morality among Nepali parties.

Karki's government will be stable if the RPP extends its support. "There is a practice that opposition can make a rightful claim to the Speaker's position," Sitaula told the Post. Asked if it wasn't ironic for the party wanting to scrap the provinces to claim the Speaker's position, Sitaula said: "Our party has a strategy to use both the street and parliament to its benefit."

Sitaula might have claimed they are looking for a unanimous offer from all the parties to take the Speaker's position. If victory is assured, Ambar

Bista, the party's senior-most member in the provincial assembly, may stand for the position.

As the largest party, the UML, too, is eyeing the Speaker's position. As Karki became the chief minister with its support, the UML expects him to agree to its proposal. Rewati Raman Bhandari, the UML chief whip in the assembly, said he hopes the Speaker will be from his party.

Currently, the UML holds the deputy Speaker's position. It has to give up the position as per the constitution to claim the Speaker's post. Article 182 (2) of the statute says there should be one woman out of the provincial Speaker and the deputy Speaker, and the two must be from different parties.

It is ready to give up the deputy Speaker's position to take the Speaker position. However, no other party is likely to back up the UML's candidate if the RPP contests the position.

A provincial assembly member elected from the anti-federal pro-monarchy party is the Speaker in Bagmati Province as well. Political experts say the RPP's dual game is a perfect example of lack of political morality among the parties in the country.

"It seems the party is still in transition," Sanjeev Humagain, chief of the MPhil programme for social science in the Nepal Open University, told the Post.

"When civil society is too weak to question parties, they don't hesitate to take any step. The RPP's position to protest against federalism and claim the Speaker's position in the provincial assembly simultaneously speaks volumes of our political forces."

The party's leadership, however, defended the move saying as long as it is in the provincial assembly, making maximum benefit out of it is natural. "We will scrap the provinces the day we have enough numbers in Parliament [adequate lawmakers to amend constitution]," Mohan Shrestha, the RPP's publicity department chief, told the Post.



POST PHOTO: SANJOG MANANDHAR
People protest against Minister for Culture, Tourism and Civil Aviation Sudan Kirati's remarks about religion, in front of Pashupati Development Trust at Gushala on Thursday. A section of Nepalis has taken offence with Kirati's comments made at a function in Kathmandu on Wednesday.

Ministry urges caution against Covid

>> Continued from page 1

Officials said that vaccines were delivered in the last week of November.

Gautam said that other people who are yet to take the fourth booster shot can also get inoculated with the vaccine.

"We have also asked provincial health bodies to ask for the vaccine doses," said Gautam. "We will supply the doses as per the demand."

Officials at the Health Ministry said that they are also in touch with the Global Alliance for Vaccine and Immunisation (GAVI) officials and informed them that the demand for the coronavirus vaccine could rise if new cases start to surge again.

With the new surge in India, infectious disease experts in Nepal said that it is just a matter of time before the virus strain enters the country.

"Earlier, we thought that a new virus from India took six to eight weeks to spread in Nepal but it does not take so much time now," said Dr

Rajiv Shrestha, infectious disease expert at Dhulikhel Hospital. "Our borders are open and the two-way movement of people is high."

India on Thursday reported two deaths due to complications arising from Covid-19 infection and 2,669 active cases in 24 hours.

The Union Health Ministry of India said that an uptick in Covid cases has been observed in Kerala, Maharashtra, Jharkhand and Karnataka.

So far India has reported 21 cases of Covid-19 sub-variant JN.1.

The World Health Organisation on Tuesday classified JN.1 as a separate 'variant of interest' given its rapid spread around the globe.

The UN health body, however, said that based on the currently available data, "the additional public health risk posed by JN.1 is currently evaluated as low".

Health authorities in Nepal say they are closely following developments in the southern neighbour.

Even though Nepal has not seen a new surge of coronavirus cases, surveillance measures, including testing and gene sequencing, will be stepped up in the coming days, according to officials.

Several countries, including China, Indonesia, the Philippines, Malaysia and Singapore, have of late reported an uptick in new cases of coronavirus.

The JN.1 strain, first detected in September in the United States, is a descendant of BA.2.86, which is a highly mutated variant of the Omicron strain of Covid-19.

Experts in Nepal have urged the authorities to step up vigilance as they said that any virus variant or disease seen in any corner of the globe could enter the country due to the global movement of people.

With the decline in infections, all preventive measures such as wearing face masks, handwashing, and maintaining social distancing have been removed.

BRIEFING

Communities below 0.5 percent of national population to be categorised as minorities

KATHMANDU: The government has decided to categorise communities with less than 0.5 percent population of the country's total into minority groups. The decision was endorsed by a Cabinet meeting on Thursday to facilitate Section 2(b) of the National Assembly Election Act, 2019. According to Communication Minister Rekha Sharma, communities that make up less than 0.5 percent of the country's total population, as per the latest census, will be categorised as minority communities.

Newly appointed justices take oath of office and secrecy

KATHMANDU: The newly appointed justices of the Supreme Court took the oath of office and secrecy on Wednesday. Chief Justice Bishowambhar Prasad Shrestha administered the oath to six new justices—Saranga Subedi, Abdul Aziz Musalman, Mahesh Sharma Paudyal, Tek Prasad Dhungana, Sunil Pokharel and Bal Krishna Dhakal—at the Sheelal Niwas in the presence of President Ramchandra Paudel. Last month, Judicial Council had recommended the candidates for the post.

How Trump's political future lies in Supreme Court justices' hands



AP/PRSS
Former President Donald Trump

>> Continued from page 1

It comes as the justices are separately weighing a request from special counsel Jack Smith to take up and rule quickly on whether Trump can be prosecuted on charges he plotted to overturn the 2020 election results. Prosecutors are hoping the justices will act swiftly to answer whether Trump is immune from prosecution in order to prevent delays that could push the trial—currently scheduled to begin on March 4—until after next year's presidential election. Trump has denied any wrongdoing in the case. The three justices appointed by Trump—Neil Gorsuch, Brett

Kavanaugh and Amy Coney Barrett—were among more than 230 federal judges installed under Trump as part of a GOP push to transform the ideological leanings of the bench. His impact on the high court has been seen in rulings rescinding the five-decade-old constitutional right to abortion, setting new standards for evaluating guns laws and striking down affirmative action in college admissions.

"This is a court that is already a lightning rod in our contemporary political discourse. A court that is viewed quite sceptically by a large swath of the American electorate," Vladeck said. But he added, "It's also a court that has not bent over backwards for Trump."

For example, in January 2022, the high court rebuffed Trump's attempt to withhold presidential documents sought by the congressional committee investigating the January 6 insurrection. The justices also allowed Trump's tax returns to be handed over to a congressional committee after his refusal to release them touched off a yearslong legal fight.

The Supreme Court was also thrust into the middle of a presidential election more than 20 years ago, in the razor-thin contest between Al Gore and George W Bush. In 2000, the justices ruled 5-4 to stop a state court-ordered recount of the vote in Florida, a

ruling that effectively settled the election in favour of Bush since neither candidate could muster an Electoral College majority without Florida.

But that case came after the votes were cast. And in 2023, "the general political instability in the United States makes the situation now much more precarious," wrote Rick Hasen, an election-law expert and professor at the UCLA School of Law, on the Election Law Blog.

It's far from certain that the Supreme Court will decide now to take up Trump's immunity claims in the election interference case, which were rejected by the trial court judge in a ruling that declared the office of the president "does not confer a lifelong 'get-out-of-jail-free' pass." Smith is asking the Supreme Court to bypass the federal appeals court in Washington, which has expedited its own review of the decision. So the Supreme Court may wait to get involved until after the appeals court judges hear the case.

Trump's lawyers urged the Supreme Court on Wednesday not to intervene before the appeals court

rules, writing that the case "presents momentous, historic questions" that require careful consideration.

The Colorado Supreme Court put its decision on hold until January 4, or until the US Supreme Court rules on the case. Colorado officials say the issue must be settled by January 5, the deadline for the state to print its presi-

denial primary ballots. Mario Nicolais, one of the Colorado attorneys on the case, said the "Supreme Court can move just as fast as it wants, and if they want to hear this before January 5 they can." It's possible the high court will try to dodge the issue and not decide the merits of the Colorado case. Gerhardt said the justices may say that the matter is left to the states or Congress. Section 3 of the 14th Amendment says: "Congress may by a vote of two-thirds of each House" undo the disqualification of someone found to have "engaged in insurrection."

"It would be like kicking the hornet's nest for the court to get into the merits of this," Gerhardt said. "It's a political hot potato. And the court generally tries to avoid taking on sort of hot-button issues that are political by nature... And the easier route for the court is to just say 'somebody else has got the responsibility, not us.'" But the Supreme Court may feel compelled to answer the issues at the heart of the case now.

"There'll be a lot of political instability if we go through a whole election season not knowing if one of two major candidates is disqualified from serving," Hasen said.

Hospitals across India on alert after cases of new Covid variant surge

In view of the looming threat, a mock drill was conducted in the state's 5,700 hospitals, including government and private, between December 13 and 17.

THE STATESMAN
NEW DELHI, DEC 21

Hospitals across India have been put on alert after multiple cases of Covid JN.1 variant were reported in several states even as experts allay fears of any major public health risk.

On Wednesday, the Centre said that a total of 21 cases of the new variant has been found in the country, including 19 from Goa and one each from Maharashtra and Kerala.

In Gujarat, there are 19 active cases of coronavirus and genome sequencing will be done to find their variant.

In view of the looming threat, mock drill was conducted in the state's 5,700 hospitals, including government and private, between December 13 and 17.

Earlier today, Union Health Minister Mansukh Mandaviya held a high-level review meeting with state and union territory health ministers on the preparedness of health facilities and services in view of the recent surge in respiratory diseases like influenza and Covid-19.

After the meeting, Maharashtra Chief Minister Eknath Shinde said that instructions have been given to

the Health Department and necessary measures have been taken to ensure the situation does not increase.

"We have taken the necessary measures regarding Corona. Instructions have been given to the Health Department. The government will take care that it does not increase in any situation," he said.



Delhi Health Minister Sourabh Bharadwaj said that even though the new variant is not very serious in nature, the government is making all the necessary arrangements.

"It's a variant of Omicron. It is mild. It is infectious but not very serious in nature. Nevertheless, the government is making all necessary arrangements, such as oxygen cylinders, ventilator beds and isolation wards for patients — all these requirements are being

reviewed again," the Delhi health minister said.

Odisha Health Minister Niranjan Pujari said that the central health minister has given suggestions regarding the increase in cases of new Covid variant and the state government has ramped up testing.

"Union Minister had given the suggestion as Covid cases are rising... We are active and surveillance is being done. 2261 tests were done in the last 7 days but no cases were detected... Our preparedness is in place. We have ordered all districts to be prepared to face any situation. We are reviewing again and again," Pujari said.

Meanwhile, the Union Health Ministry officials said that the Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR) is working on genome sequencing of the new JN.1 variant of SARS-CoV-2.

The World Health Organisation (WHO) has classified the JN.1 as a "variant of interest" but argued that it didn't pose any major public health risk.

According to the latest Union Health Ministry Data, the active cases of coronavirus in India have increased to 2,311.



AP/PRSS
Devotees, some wearing face masks as a precaution, pray at a church ahead of Christmas in Bengaluru, India, Wednesday.

OPINION



OUR VIEW

Don't be cruel

With the mindset of seeing daughters as a burden, child marriage is hard to do away with.

Nepal has a long history of efforts to curb child marriage. From making the practice illegal in 1963 to endorsing a national strategy to end it by 2030 as a part of Sustainable Development Goals, the country has taken several positive steps. The Civil Code 2017 has set 20 as the minimum marriage age for women and men. In this connection, many national and international organisations are joining hands with the government to reach rural areas. After the federal setup came into effect, local governments have been more active in trying to root out underage marriage. But these efforts have unfortunately fallen short, and young girls are still being married off too soon.

This problem is rampant, especially in rural areas, and among Nepal's poor and marginalised communities. Take for instance the Sinja area in the remote district of Karnali province, Jumla. In the past three years, 755 of the 1,107 people who married in Hima Rural Municipality were underage. Similarly, in Sinja Rural Municipality, 184 of the 301 people who married were too young to tie the knot. In Kanakasundari Rural Municipality, when 1,533 people married in the last three years, 571 were of the ineligible age. But these numbers could be higher because many cases go unreported, and child marriages are performed in a hush-hush manner.

Further, the trend of child love marriages in which underage couples marry by choice has also been increasing—one of the many reasons the country has the third-highest rate of early marriage in Asia and the second-highest in South Asia. According to a 2014 survey by an organisation working to end child marriage, Girls Not Brides Nepal, young couples initiated one-third of such marriages. Data from Hima, Sinja and Kanakasundari Rural Municipalities also suggest a rise in teenage marriage. The trend is now increasing in many parts of the country with young people's exposure to social media, challenging the decades-long efforts to curb them.

This is a terrible sign. Early marriage not only puts the lives of young girls at risk, but also makes them vulnerable to maternal death, complications in pregnancy, other health issues, dropping out of school and domestic violence. In 2022 alone, according to a report by the Informal Sector Service Centre (INSEC), 5,743 women, including 1,444 girls, were the victims of violence.

In order to prevent young girls and boys and also the parents from opting for child marriage, there is a need to ramp up awareness about the potential risks. As the patriarchal mindset of seeing daughters as a burden is deep-rooted, this problem will be challenging to tackle. This is why we also need sensitisation programmes to make parents realise that their daughters are valuable beings and that marrying them off early hampers their future potential and life.

The rural municipalities in the Sinja area are campaigning against the practice. With the help of organisations working on child rights, the officials have been publishing an annual study on child marriage since 2020. This is a laudable step and worth emulating for other communities. These kinds of local level efforts, when coupled with more money and manpower from the federal level, can make a decisive difference. Thousands of precious lives and livelihoods will be saved in the process.

THEIR VIEW

Cricket audio leak

While it indicates the tension between Mr Ashraf and Babar, its timing is questionable.

Of late, Pakistan Cricket Board chief Zaka Ashraf has been dogged by controversy. Not too long after Mr Ashraf shared a screenshot of a conversation between Babar Azam and a PCB official, which was aired on television, a 135-second audio—purportedly featuring Mr Ashraf's voice—has been doing the rounds on social media. So far, the PCB has neither denied nor admitted to the leak. And while it indicates the tension between Mr Ashraf and Babar, the former all-format captain of the national team, its timing is questionable. The audio was leaked after the team lost in the opening Test against Australia, its first game under Shan Masood's leadership. Shan was appointed Test captain after Babar resigned, following Pakistan's exit from the ODI World Cup.

The audio leak shines a light on how the PCB chief apparently forced Babar out. In that private conversation between Mr Ashraf and members of his family, Mr Ashraf says he had an idea that Babar would not stay on as Test captain if he was not given the same role in the white-ball teams. That is why, he says, he made that offer and already had a backup in mind once Babar would announce he was stepping down as skipper from all formats. It all adds up, considering the events on the day when Babar met Zaka after Pakistan returned from the World Cup in India. Barely 20 minutes after Babar announced his decision to quit, the PCB announced Shan and Shaheen Shah Afridi as Test and T20 skippers. In the audio, Mr Ashraf also mentions that Babar had cultivated a culture of favouritism, with his close friends as part of the squad. There is also discussion on the fact that most players in the current squad are clients of Saya Corporation, an agency run by Talha Rehmani. However, Mr Ashraf seemed to have forgotten that Shaheen is also a client of the same agency, as well as Babar's close friend. What has emerged, however, could have a profound impact on Pakistan cricket. Evidently, Mr Ashraf holds a grudge against Babar and Saya Corporation. His attempts to regularise player agents—it is being mooted that an agent can have only two players of the national team on his roster—could turn the players against him, if his actions and words have not already done so.

—Dawn (Pakistan)/ANN

Further researching the 1923 treaty

|| POLITICS OF KNOWLEDGE ||

Did the Nepali public at large feel like they were members of a more sovereign country after 1923?

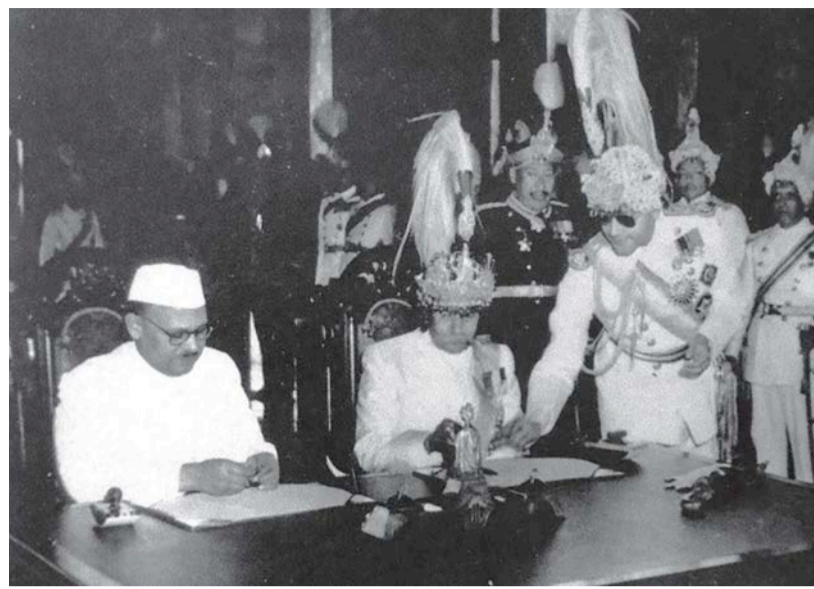
PRATYOUSH ONTA



The "Treaty of Friendship between Great Britain and Nepal, 1923" was signed on December 21, 1923, by the Rana Prime Minister Chandra Shamsheer and the British envoy in Kathmandu William F.T. O'Connor. To mark the centenary of this treaty, the Madan Puraskar Pustakalaya (MPP) and the Britain-Nepal Academic Council jointly organised a conference in Patan on December 16-17, 2023. Several presenters revisited the treaty from various vantage points.

In his opening remarks, one of the two coordinators of the conference, Kanak Mani Dixit, correctly pointed out that scholars had not paid much attention to this treaty of late. The two best academic discussions of this treaty that I know of were based on research done in the 1960s. The most thorough discussion of the diplomatic dynamics prior to the signing of this treaty is provided by the Indian historian Kanchanmoy Mojumdar in his book *Political Relations between India and Nepal 1877-1923* (1973). His work was earlier completed as a PhD dissertation at the University of London in 1968. An insightful analysis of this treaty and Chandra Shamsheer's foreign policy is provided by Asad Husain in his book *British India's Relations with the Kingdom of Nepal* (1970; PhD completed at the University of Minnesota in 1965). About 23 years ago, Pitamber Lal Yadav submitted a doctoral dissertation to Tribhuvan University with the title "A Case Study of Treaties between Nepal and British India, 1792-1923", but as far as I know, it was not published as a book and I have not read the dissertation.

The 1923 treaty was mostly demanded by Chandra Shamsheer, and its text of seven articles was finalised after several years of negotiation between the two sides. On the British side, the treaty was an acknowledgement of Nepal's massive contributions to the Allied Nations during World War I in



the form of Gurkha soldiers and generous donations (later sale) of railway sleepers to British India after the war. Many analysts consider this treaty (especially its articles five and six) to be important for securing the recognition of Nepal's sovereignty in the international arena. In providing this take, they are reiterating what Chandra Shamsheer said on the occasion of its signing: "While we have here the acknowledgement in an unequivocal manner of the place we occupy as an independent nation, it dispels for all time the misconceptions about this that seemed to have hovered over our country."

Although I am interested in many aspects of early 20th-century history, such treaty texts don't animate me as a researcher. However, that doesn't mean I don't want to read new scholarship on it. Hence, I raise some questions that others might want to consider in their future work.

First, did the 1923 treaty really change Nepal's sovereign status, given that it was already an independent country before the treaty was signed? Those who want to answer this question will need to tackle the challenge posed by the late Rishikesh Shaha, who was a diplomat and politician before he wrote *Modern Nepal: A Political History 1769-1955* (1990). Shaha claims the treaty "did not bring about any significant change in Nepal's status." He further says after the treaty was signed, "despite the fact that the very first article of the treaty provided that the two Governments agreed to acknowledge and respect each other's independence, both external and internal, Nepal's foreign relations in fact continued to be conducted through New Delhi."

What I take Shaha to be saying is that

while the *text* of the treaty acknowledged Nepal's independent status, the *practice* of Nepal's foreign diplomacy continued to be guided by New Delhi, at least through the end of the Rana rule in 1951. Knowledgeable analysts of Nepal's diplomacy during the late Rana years and in the later decades of the 20th century will have to prove Shaha wrong if they are to convince others about the absolute importance of the 1923 treaty in enhancing Nepal's status as an independent country. For this, they might have to revisit the public archives in Kathmandu, New Delhi, London and elsewhere where new documents might have become available in the past 55 years.

Second, did the Nepali public at large feel like they were members of a more sovereign country after 1923? Let us think of the elites first. What did Kaiser SJB Rana and Mrigendra SJB Rana (son and grandson of Chandra Shamsheer, respectively) record in their diaries after the treaty was signed? What did Hemraj Sharma and Rammani Acharya Dixit, two important functionaries of Chandra Shamsheer, record in their diaries? Since the diaries of these four individuals (and others) are held by their progenies, researchers should be able to access them.

To find out what the average members of the Nepali public thought about the treaty, researchers will have to read books and periodicals published after 1924. For instance, did the treaty find any important coverage in Nepali books published from inside and outside of Nepal in the subsequent decade? In addition, researchers will also want to re-read newspapers such as *Gorkha Sansar* (a weekly published from Dehradun between 1926 and 1928)

and *Tarun Gorkha* (1928 to 1933?). My colleague Devendra Uprety is poring over the archives of *Gorkha Sansar* for his research on educational history and tells me that he has not found any major references to the 1923 treaty thus far. Instead, as can be expected in an oppositional platform, there are many criticisms of Chandra Shamsheer in this newspaper. For instance, in the issue dated March 6, 1928, a writer identified as "Ek Muglaniya" wrote a piece to counter the propaganda ("Unnatishil Nepal") published in Calcutta newspapers during Chandra Shamsheer's visit to that city in late 1927. Focusing on the education sector, this writer asks why there is just one high school (Darbar School) and one college (Tribhuvan-Chandra College) for 70-80 lakh Nepalis in "Unnatishil Nepal".

Moreover, Uprety tells me that in many write-ups published in *Gorkha Sansar*, several writers mention that although Nepal was independent, it did not have the modern institutions (schools, colleges, etc.) that colonised India did. In other words, they question the vacuity of the sovereign claim by pointing out that the autocratic Rana state and the poverty of Nepal, among other factors, had forced them to seek education and jobs in British India.

Third, did the "generosity" of Chandra Shamsheer to secure the treaty enhance his personal wealth while turning Nepal and Nepalis poorer? The cost to the families and communities that sent Gurkha men to fight the empire's war during WWI was enormous. His "hunting diplomacy", whereby British rulers were invited to elaborate hunting expeditions in the Nepal Tarai, surely contributed to the depletion of rhinos, tigers and other wildlife. Similarly, his donation of timber for railway sleepers might have contributed to massive deforestation in the Tarai. How should political historians calculate the pluses and minuses of such processes?

Apart from the ones asked above, other interesting questions can be asked from different intellectual vantage points. Those cannot be pursued here in detail for reasons of space. However, they supersede concerns related to sovereignty per se and take us into the territory of variously connected histories between Nepal and India. Those questions will allow us to think about themes related to the mobility of labour across various categories, access to education, the making of the Nepali public sphere, political conscientisation and mobilisation, and environmental history. I am glad to report that some young Nepali researchers are already working on these themes, and the results of their research will be available soon.

How to prevent an AI apocalypse?

Public concerns have shifted from automation-induced job losses to the prospect of a superintelligence going rogue.

ROBERT SKIDELSKY



A little over a year ago, the San Francisco-based OpenAI released its chatbot, ChatGPT, triggering an artificial intelligence gold rush and reigniting the age-old debate about the effects of automation on human welfare.

The fear of displacement by machines can be traced back to the nineteenth-century Industrial Revolution, when groups of English handloom weavers, known as Luddites, began destroying the power looms that threatened their livelihoods. The movement, which peaked between 1811 and 1817, was ultimately suppressed by government forces, and its leaders were executed or exiled to Australia.

But the Luddites' arguments found an unexpected (and somewhat ironic) champion in renowned economist David Ricardo, who argued in his 1817 book *On the Principles of Political Economy and Taxation* that "the opinion entertained by the labouring class, that the employment of machinery is frequently detrimental to their interests, is not founded on prejudice and error, but is conformable to the correct principles of political economy." The British economist Nassau Senior, for his part, advised the weavers to "get out of that branch of production."

They ended up doing just that: 250,000 handloom jobs disappeared between 1820 and 1860. But while mechanisation ended up benefiting human workers—the United Kingdom's population and per capita real income multiplied over the same period—it adversely affected horses, whose numbers fell sharply as trains (and, later, motorised vehicles) replaced horse-drawn transport.

Since the Industrial Revolution, the prevailing pro-machine argument has been that by increasing labour productivity, automation boosts real incomes, allowing more individuals to enjoy higher living standards without corre-

sponding job losses. Moreover, liberation from tedious menial tasks has enabled us to redirect our energy to more valuable pursuits.

The Luddites' modern-day counterparts, on the other hand, emphasise the downsides of automation, especially the potential to destroy livelihoods and communities. An equitable distribution of income and power, they argue, is crucial to reaping the long-term benefits of technological progress. Techno-pessimists like Martin Ford and Daniel Susskind have argued that emerging technologies like AI will create too few new jobs, resulting in increased poverty and "technological unemployment."

The rise of generative AI and the anticipated arrival of artificial general intelligence—an AI capable of any cognitive task that humans can perform—have supercharged the debate between techno-optimists and techno-skeptics. For example, in the health-care sector, a seemingly endless wellspring of tech hype, AI promises improved diagnostics, advanced telemedicine, more effective drugs and reduced adminis-

trative burdens on doctors and nurses, leaving more time for patient care.

This seems to reflect the prevailing view among mainstream experts that generative AI will augment, rather than replace, human jobs. By automating routine tasks, it promises to free humans to pursue more creative work. To be sure, this transformation will require lifelong learning, making continuous education a condition not just for participating in the job market but also for accessing an expanding array

of online services. With the advent of generative AI, concerns have shifted from automation-induced job losses to the prospect of a superintelligence going rogue—a fear that dates back to Mary Shelley's 1818 novel *Frankenstein*; or, The Modern Prometheus. Echoing these sentiments, former Google CEO Eric Schmidt recently remarked that while current AI models remain "under human control," there is a real risk that one could develop the capability for "recursive self-improvement," gain autonomy, and begin "setting its own goals." Eventually, he warned, a "computer cluster" could evolve into a "truly superhuman expert" capable of acting independently.

As experts and scholars grow increasingly concerned about AI's capacity to destroy the world, a growing number of voices have called for AI development to be aligned with human goals and values. There are two ways to achieve this. The first is to restrict the availability and sales of potentially harmful AI-based products,



SHUTTERSTOCK

as policymakers in Europe and elsewhere have tried to do by imposing strict regulations on emerging technologies like autonomous cars and facial recognition.

One obvious problem with this approach is that reaching a consensus on what constitutes harm is difficult in a world in which moral relativism is the norm. Since it is increasingly unclear who "owns" content that is deemed harmful, it is virtually impossible to hold vendors or providers

accountable. Moreover, attempts to regulate the use of technology tend to come too late.

The second way to rein in AI is to limit altogether the development of potentially dangerous products. But curbing demand is more complicated than restricting supply, especially in modern societies where competitive forces—both commercial and geopolitical—make slowing down technological innovation exceedingly difficult.

The recent turmoil at OpenAI is a case in point. In November, the company's board of directors briefly fired CEO Sam Altman, reportedly due to concerns that AI could one day lead to humanity's extinction. Although Altman was reinstated just days later, the scandal underscored the speed with which ostensibly beneficial technologies could become existential risks.

With rapid commercialisation apparently taking precedence over caution, and competition hastening the development of increasingly powerful tools, an AI-induced apocalypse seems increasingly plausible.

The inescapable conclusion is that merely regulating AI is not enough. But by introducing concepts such as neo-Luddism and redistribution into the public debate, we could develop the political and intellectual vocabulary needed to mitigate the threats posed by these emerging technologies.

For example, a neo-Luddite might ask: Why are affluent societies, which already produce more than enough for their citizens to live comfortably, still focused on maximising GDP growth? One answer might be the lack of a fair distribution of wealth and income that would ensure that the benefits of productivity and efficiency gains are widely shared.

Another explanation is that technology itself is not intrinsically good or bad; it is a means to an end. And in today's political economy, "technological innovation" is often a euphemism for enabling the rich and powerful to redirect capital from industry to finance, thereby monopolising the benefits of automation and immiserating everyone else.

Skidelsky, a member of the British House of Lords, is a Professor Emeritus of Political Economy at Warwick University. He is the author of an award-winning biography of John Maynard Keynes and The Machine Age: An Idea, a History, a Warning (Allen Lane, 2023).

—Project Syndicate

FOREX

US Dollar	133.55
Euro	146.44
Pound Sterling	169.07
Swiss Franc	155.15
Australian Dollar	90.15
Canadian Dollar	100.07
Singapore Dollar	100.44
Japanese Yen (10)	9.34
Chinese Yuan	18.68
Saudi Arab Riyal	35.60
Qatari Riyal	36.64
Thai Bhat	3.83
UAE Dhiram	36.36
Malaysian Ringgit	28.69
Korean Won (100)	10.23

Exchange rates fixed by Nepal Rastra Bank

SHARES

Nepse (in percent) **2,109.10** pts
-1.53%

HIGHEST LOSERS					
SJLIC	USLB	SFNF	GBLBS	UNHPL	GHL
-7.44	-7.26	-6.94	-6.81	-6.52	-6.12
MODERATE LOSERS					
PRIN	HBLD83	PRSF	HBLD86	KMCDB	MCHL
-0.27	-0.23	-0.23	-0.15	-0.15	-0.07
MODERATE GAINERS					
NIBLPP	UMHL	LLBS	NICFC	SFEF	CBLO88
0.22	0.18	0.14	0.12	0.12	0.1
HIGHEST GAINERS					
BNL	ALBSL	DLBS	BPW	CKHL	VLUCL
10	10	10	10	10	9.99

BULLION PRICE PER TOLA

Fine Gold	Rs 119,000
Silver	Rs 1,480

SOURCE: FENEGOSIDA

BIZLINE

Japan begins on-site inspection of Toyota unit Daihatsu

TOKYO: Japanese officials on Thursday started an on-site inspection at the headquarters of Toyota subsidiary Daihatsu, the transport ministry said, after an investigation found it had rigged safety tests and was forced to suspend all shipments of its vehicles. The independent probe found the malpractice dated back to 1989 and led Toyota to express its "sincere apologies" and pledge to carry out "a fundamental reform". The panel was set up earlier this year to probe a safety scandal that emerged in April. The investigation "found new irregularities in 174 items within 25 test categories" in addition to wrongdoing previously detected in April and May involving door parts and side-collision tests, Toyota said after the report was released. (AFP)

Canada bids farewell to plastic straws

CANADA: Canadian restaurants and cafes were no longer permitted as of Wednesday to offer plastic straws, food containers, checkout bags or cutlery to customers—despite a court ruling that such restrictions are unconstitutional. The regulation banning single-use plastics was introduced last year and was to be phased in as part of Ottawa's commitment to achieve zero plastic waste by 2030. But it hit a snag in November when a Canadian court ruled in a case brought by oil and chemical companies that it was "unreasonable and unconstitutional." (AFP)

Greece to join naval coalition to protect Red Sea shipping

ATHENS: Greece will join a US-led naval coalition to protect the Red Sea global shipping lane from Yemen's Huthi rebels, the defence minister said Thursday. A Greek navy frigate will join the task force on orders from Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis, said Defence Minister Nikos Dendias. As a foremost shipping nation, Greece had a "fundamental interest" in addressing a "massive threat" to global maritime transport, Dendias said in a televised statement. The task force announced by US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin on Monday initially included Britain, Bahrain, Canada, France, Italy, the Netherlands, Norway, Seychelles and Spain. (AFP)

X users report global outage: Monitoring site

SAN FRANCISCO: Tens of thousands of global users of X, formerly Twitter, on Thursday reported problems using the Elon Musk-owned social network. Reports of the platform's troubles began spiking just before 0600 GMT on monitoring site Downdetector. "User reports indicate problems at X (Twitter)," the site said. Timelines on the platform were emptied and no new posts visible, although the twitter.com site was available. (AFP)

Government to review DPR of Motipur Industrial Area

The government has decided to reduce the size of the industrial area by 250 bigha, address the locals' concerns, and proceed with the project.

GHANASHYAM GAUTAM
BUTWAL, DEC 21

The government has decided to reassess the detailed project report (DPR) of the Motipur Industrial Area in southern Tarai, amid discontentment among the locals who have refused to surrender their land to the project.

Earlier, in 2021, four people died in a violent protest over the land issue.

Many people living on the land do not have land ownership documents.

The work on the project has been halted after the authority failed to conclude the public hearing on the environmental impact assessment report of the project.

Three years ago, the project was estimated to cost Rs12 billion.

The federal government's cabinet meeting on March 14, 2016, had announced the acquisition of 813 bigha [550.6 hectares] for the Motipur Industrial Area as per the 'one province, one industrial area' concept.

The project has decided to manage the emerging conflict by reducing the proposed industrial area by 250 bigha to 563 bigha [381.3 hectares].

The government had planned to employ 1 million people in the industrial sector after the announcement, the Industry Ministry directed the Ministry of Forest and Land Management to transfer land ownership to Industrial Area Management by fulfilling all legal processes.

By completing the land ownership transfer, the detailed project report was approved on June 4, 2018.

According to the detailed project report, the industrial area would house 1,022 factories on the 813 bigha area, which was divided into five sectors.



POST FILE PHOTO

Three years ago, the project was estimated to cost Rs12 billion.

The government established the project office in Butwal Sub-Metropolitan-19 in 2019.

On March 5, 2021, locals chased away then finance and industry ministers Bishnu Paudel and Lekh Raj Bhatta when they reached Ranigunj, Butwal to lay the foundation stone for the Motipur Industrial Area.

Protest erupted. Four demonstrators were injured during the clash between the locals and the police. Bhatta and Paudel, however, laid the foundation stone and returned.

Locals argued that the industrial zone would affect more than 2,000 fam-

ilies and that they would lose their land. On October 10, 2021, four people died in a violent clash between police and squatters at the Motipur Industrial Area. Since then, the project work has been halted.

Prakash Adhikari, the chief engineer of the project, said out of 813 bigha, the locals are using around 200 bigha for residential purposes.

Without effective dispute management, the industrial area project cannot move ahead, he said.

The project, however, has started the detailed land survey using drones.

"We have submitted the report on

the residential areas, government land, squatters area and farmland to the National Development Action Committee, which is chaired by the prime minister," Adhikari said.

"We have decided to manage the conflict by reducing the project area by 250 bigha. The review of the detailed project report will be conducted accordingly."

"We hope that the agitating locals will agree now. This will also reduce the cost of the project," said Adhikari.

The proposed site for the industrial estate consists of forests and the dry bed of the Tinau River left behind

EU strikes budget reform deal after two-year wrangle

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE
BRUSSELS, DEC 21

The EU agreed reforms on Wednesday that will loosen budget rules to encourage investment while keeping debt and spending under control, after France and Germany bridged their differences.

Finance ministers from the 27 members met by video link to hammer out the agreement—after their French and German colleagues got together in Paris on Tuesday to clear the way for a compromise.

France's finance minister Bruno Le Maire hailed the deal. "Historic accord! After two years of intense negotiations we have new European budget rules," he said on social media.

Dutch minister Sigrid Kaag said the agreement would "encourage reforms, with room for investments and tailored to the specific situation of the member state in question".

She said "they work counter-cyclically so that potential economic growth is not cut short", adding that the rules would be better adhered to than

in the past. The fiscal straitjacket imposed on EU members—limiting countries' debt to 60 percent of GDP and public deficits to 3 percent—was loosened during the Covid pandemic to allow greater state spending.

Originally, this was meant to be temporary.

But it launched a two-year debate between countries led by Germany that wanted a return to rigorous controls, and others led by France that wanted more flexibility.

The latter wanted to allow spending to finance, for exam-

ple, the transition to green energy or arms deliveries to Ukraine.

While the compromise deal reconfirms the three-percent deficit target, it softens the rules for how quickly and a severely a country has to cut spending to get back within the parameters.

"It was a hard road," Spanish finance minister Nadia Calvino, whose country holds the EU presidency, said after the video conference.

"It was a difficult path to tread. And now we have finally reached safe harbour at a historic moment," she added.

Ski prices rise but skiers keep coming, for now

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE
ALTENMARKT (AUSTRIA), DEC 21

In the heart of the Austrian Alps, workers at the world's leading ski maker churn out pair after pair for international clients who are undeterred by the sport's snowballing costs.

Atomic—which raised prices by five percent compared to last year—made record sales of 277 million euros (\$303 million) in 2022 and is on course to surpass that figure this year.

Austrian ski lift operators have also hiked prices this year, in line with other resorts throughout the Alps.

But skiers keep coming, for now.

"Now they want to have the best products, they want to have the best skis, the best boots, everything best," Atomic CEO Wolfgang Mayrhofer told AFP in an interview.

Atomic—a subsidiary of Finnish firm Amer Sports, which was bought by a Chinese consortium—employs some 1,000 people and produces 550,000 pairs of skis per year.

It produces skis in a factory in the small town of Altenmarkt, near Salzburg, and another one in southern Bulgaria. A pair of Atomic skis costs anywhere between several hundred to several thousand euros.

The company has profited from an "outdoor sports boom" in recent years, as well as growth in the sale of helmets and other protective gear, Mayrhofer said.

Atomic's clientele includes people with second homes in the Alps who drive around in "huge SUVs", as well as tourists flying in from abroad and renting skis, he said.

It's not just skis that have become more expensive.

On the mountains around Altenmarkt, downhill skiers are paying up to 8.5 percent more for their lift passes this season, said Christoph Eisinger, managing director of Ski Amade, as resorts pass on high energy and other costs.

A record 58,000 season passes have already been sold for the area, up from 54,000 last year. A season pass costs 770 euros per adult



AFP/RSS

Skiers flock to the slopes in Schladming, Austria on December 13.

in pre-sales. On the slopes, skiers told AFP they were feeling the pinch but wanted to keep enjoying their hobby.

"I would rather save elsewhere because skiing is really our sport," German holiday-maker Andrea Mentges, 42, said as she put on her skis outside the cable car station on the 1,906-metre (6,253-foot) Planai mountain.

Costs are expected to rise further as climate change means greater reliance on expensive man-made snow while low-lying ski areas get squeezed out, said Oliver Fritz, senior economist at the Austrian Institute of Economic Research (WIFO).

Fritz said "last chance tourism" may be fuelling demand.

"Maybe not consciously, but unconsciously, people are already aware that skiing is extremely endangered by climate change and that they

should take advantage of the opportunity now," he told AFP.

A study conducted by market researcher Manova, which interviewed some 3,000 respondents online in Austria, Germany and Switzerland in September, found that financial reasons and a lack of snow were the top two reasons people skied less or not at all last year. Half of the world's ski resorts are in Europe, where they generate about \$30 billion per year in revenue and play a key role in sustaining local economies.

Argentina's Milei orders major deregulation of economy

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE
BUENOS AIRES, DEC 21

Argentina's new leader Javier Milei unveiled Wednesday a series of measures to deregulate the country's struggling economy, eliminating or changing more than 300 rules via presidential decree, including on rent and labor practices.

"The goal is to start along the path to rebuilding the country... and start to undo the huge number of regulations that have held back and prevented economic growth," Milei said in a televised speech from the presidential palace, flanked by his cabinet. Latin America's third-biggest economy is on its knees after decades of debt and financial mismanagement, with inflation surpassing 160 percent year-on-year and 40 percent of Argentines living in poverty.

Milei, who was elected last month and took office 10 days ago, has pledged to curb inflation, but warned that economic "shock" treatment is the only solution and that the situation will get worse before it improves.

Among the changes announced Wednesday are the elimination of a law regulating rent, as well as rules preventing the privatization of state enterprises. Milei also announced a "modernization of labor law to facilitate the process of creating real jobs" and a series of other deregulation measures affecting tourism, satellite internet services, pharmaceuticals, wine production and foreign trade.

Following the speech, thousands of people converged on the streets near the Congress to voice their discontent.

Protesters banged pots and pans, climbed gates and waved the national flag. "I am here because I am terrified by the decree," Nicolas Waiselbaum, a 48-year-old teacher, told AFP.

Leopoldo Maldonado, a 25-year-old student, said "the measures are very negative." "I'm especially worried about the rent law and the labour reform. It is already very complicated for young people to get a stable job," he said.

The decree, published in the government gazette at mid night, must be assessed by a joint committee of lawmakers from both chambers of the legislature within 10 days.

Constitutional law expert Emiliano Vitaliani told AFP that the decree could only be overturned if rejected by both the lower House and the Senate.

आकर्षक जग्गा विक्रिम

विश्व सम्पदा बौद्धनाथ स्तुपाबाट करिब १.५ किलोमिटरको दुरीमा, जोरपाटीबिर्सेगौज (गोकर्णेश्वर वडा नं. ८) को शान्तिमय क्षेत्रमा ८ रोपनी जग्गामा २ वटा विल्डिङ सहितको जग्गा विक्रिम।

(गुम्बा, बुटिक, होटल, पार्टि प्यालेस, कलेज, डिपार्टमेन्टल स्टोर, अपार्टमेन्ट, वा अन्य कुनै पनि व्यावसायिक लगानीको लागि अति उपयुक्त।)

केवल खरिदकतलै मात्र (No Broker!!!)

सम्पर्क : S. Kumar, 9767588791

Town Development Fund
Baneshwor, Kathmandu

Notice of Cancellation of bid

Date of Publication: 22 December, 2023

This is to notify all the concerned bidders that the invitation of bid published on 8 November, 2023 in "The Kathmandu Post" and www.bolpatra.gov.np/egp for the Support selected pilot municipalities in automation of financial reporting including expenditure tracking system has been cancelled as per the provision made in Clause 26 (1) (a) of public procurement act 2023.

Government of Nepal
Ministry of Physical Infrastructure and Transport
Department of Roads
Project Directorate (ADB)
Bishalnagar, Kathmandu

Expression of Interest (EOI) for Construction Supervision of Road Safety Implementation Consultant under SASEC Highway Improvement Project (SHIP-RSIC)

(First Date of Publication: 22 December 2023)

Consultant Selection Recruitment Notice (CSRN) for Construction Supervision of Road Safety Implementation Consultant under SASEC Highway Improvement Project (SHIP-RSIC) from eligible National consultants has been called in the Asian Development Bank's Consultant Management System (CMS) web-portal. Interested Eligible National Consultants are invited to submit their EOI online only in the ADB's CMS portal not later than 21th January, 2024 in the format prescribed in the CSRN.

PROJECT DIRECTOR

WORLD

BRIEFING

Russia has fired 7,400 missiles, 3,700 Shahed drones in war so far, Kyiv says

KYIV: Russia has launched about 7,400 missiles and 3,700 Shahed attack drones at targets in Ukraine during its 22-month-old invasion, Kyiv said on Thursday, illustrating the vast scale of Moscow's aerial assaults. Ukrainian air defences were able to shoot down 1,600 of the missiles and 2,900 of the drones, air force spokesman Yuriy Ihnat said in televised comments. "We are faced with an enormous aggressor, and we are fighting back," he said. He said the lower missile downing rate was due to the use of supersonic ballistic missiles, which are much harder to hit, as well as the fact that the West supplied Ukraine with advanced Patriot air defence systems only well into the war. Ukraine has received advanced air defence systems, including several Patriots, from Western allies throughout the invasion, allowing it to shoot down more missiles. (REUTERS)

After same-sex blessing ruling, pope decries inflexible ideologies

VATICAN CITY: Pope Francis on Thursday warned against inflexible ideological positions that can hinder the Church from seeing reality and moving forward, speaking days after a declaration allowing blessings of same-sex couples that conservatives have condemned. Francis, who turned 87 on Sunday, made his comments in his traditional Christmas greetings to members of the Curia, the Vatican's central administration. In the early years of his papacy, Francis made the Christmas greetings an occasion for blistering critiques of the bureaucracy, highlighting what at the time he called its "illnesses" and "diseases". On Thursday he mentioned the continuing debate between progressives and conservatives 60 years after the Second Vatican Council, which ushered the Church into the modern world. (REUTERS)

Unexpected Eurotunnel strike disrupts train traffic under Channel

PARIS: An unexpected strike by French workers at Eurotunnel, the undersea link between Britain and continental Europe, interrupted cross-Channel rail traffic on Thursday, threatening the Christmas holiday plans of many travellers. The surprise strike over bonus pay caused massive disruptions on the busy London-Paris route. Some trains had to return to the French capital just before reaching London, prompting the French government to call the industrial action "unacceptable". Thousands of travellers were stranded at the Gare du Nord high-speed train terminal in Paris. (REUTERS)

No functional hospitals left in northern Gaza: WHO

The UN health agency says it led missions to two badly damaged hospitals, Al-Shifa and Al-Ahli, in the north of the Palestinian territory on Wednesday.

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE
GENEVA, DEC 21

There are no longer any functional hospitals in the north of the Gaza Strip, the World Health Organization said on Thursday, describing "unbearable" scenes of largely abandoned patients begging for food and water.

The UN health agency said it had led missions to two badly damaged hospitals, Al-Shifa and Al-Ahli, in the north of the Palestinian territory on Wednesday.

"Our staff are running out of words to describe the beyond catastrophic situation facing remaining patients and health workers," said Richard Peepkorn, the WHO representative for the occupied Palestinian territory.

His comment came amid increasingly frantic diplomatic efforts to secure a pause in the war that Hamas says has already claimed 20,000 lives in Gaza, 70 percent of them women and children.

The war began when Hamas attacked Israel on October 7, killing around 1,140 people, mostly civilians, and abducting about 250, according to an AFP tally based on Israeli figures.

WHO has already described Al-Shifa, the largest hospital in Gaza which last month was the focus of an extended Israeli army operation and has been devastated by Israeli bombardments, as "a blood bath".

The smaller Al-Ahli hospital had since become the only place where surgeries were possible in the north, but its director said it had stopped operating on Tuesday after being stormed by the Israeli army.

The WHO-led mission revealed that Al Ahli, which just two days ago



Al-Shifa hospital in northern Gaza, seen earlier this month, is able to provide little more than first aid, the head of the WHO said.

was "overwhelmed with patients needing emergency care", was now "a shell of a hospital", Peepkorn told reporters in Geneva via video link from Jerusalem.

"There are no operating theatres anymore due to the lack of fuel, power, medical supplies and health workers, including surgeons and other specialists," he added.

"It has completely stopped function-

ing." Of Gaza's original 36 hospitals, only nine are now partially functional, all of them in the south.

"There are no functional hospitals left in the north."

Hospitals, protected under international humanitarian law, have repeatedly been hit by Israeli strikes in Gaza since the war erupted.

The Israeli military accuses Hamas of having tunnels under hospitals and

using the medical facilities as command centres, a charge denied by the Islamist group. Asked about the charge, Peepkorn said "we on our missions have not seen anything of this on the ground", adding that WHO was "not in a position to assert how any hospital is being used".

Although Wednesday's mission had aimed to deliver fuel, he said, the lack of security guarantees had meant

they could only deliver medical supplies and medicines.

But that was not enough, he said. "Without fuel, staff, and other essential needs, medicines won't make a difference and all patients will die slowly and painfully."

Al Ahli, he said, still counts around 10 staff striving to provide basic first aid, while around 80 patients are sheltering in a church within the hospital grounds and the orthopaedic section.

Sean Casey, a WHO Emergency Medical Teams coordinator who was on the mission, described "unbelievable conditions".

At Al Ahli, the team had walked through the courtyard, where bodies wrapped in white plastic sheeting piled up, and with automatic gunfire sounding nearby, he told journalists, speaking from Rafah in southern Gaza. In the church, "we found a really unbearable scene," Casey said, describing around 30 patients, including young children and some with serious trauma wounds begging, not for care but for water.

"At the moment, it is a place where people are waiting to die."

He reiterated the increasingly urgent call for a ceasefire to allow sufficient amounts of aid in and also to evacuate more patients from Gaza.

Asked when whether time was running out, he said: "I think it is [already] too late."

"We are dealing with starving adults, children... Everywhere we go, people are asking us for food," he said.

"Even in the hospitals, ... people with open, bleeding fractures, they ask for food."

"If that is not an indicator of the desperation, I don't know what is."

A dozen people still missing after China's earthquake, 137 dead

REUTERS
DAHEJIA, CHINA, DEC 21

A dozen people were still missing on Thursday after a 6.2-magnitude earthquake struck northwestern Gansu province late Monday, and netizens questioned the speed at which rescue operations had ended.

Chinese media reported that search-and-rescue work in Gansu ended at 3 pm on Tuesday, about 15 hours after the disaster hit a remote and mountainous area near the border straddling Gansu and Qinghai provinces. It was not immediately clear whether the search in Qinghai was continuing.

In Gansu, 115 people had been found dead as of 9 a.m. on Wednesday (0100 GMT) and 784 were injured, authorities said. Gansu has not reported any missing persons.

Neighbouring Qinghai saw its death

toll rose to 22 with 198 injured and 12 missing as of 8:56 pm on Wednesday.

More than 207,000 homes were wrecked and nearly 15,000 collapsed in Gansu, affecting more than 145,000 people. Discussions online showed netizens curious about how quickly rescue efforts wrapped up in Gansu, with many suggesting that the sub-freezing temperatures were the main factor in shortening the "golden period" for finding survivors - typically 72 hours post-disaster.

People trapped under rubble exposed to prolonged temperatures of -10° Celsius (14°F) run the risk of rapid hypothermia and may only be able to live for five to 10 hours even if uninjured, local media reported, citing researchers.

"They would have been dead by the time they were found, even 24 hours is already too long. Outdoor tempera-

tures are below minus 10 C," a user on Chinese microblogging platform Weibo commented. Some users on Weibo considered other factors such as that the search area was not especially wide, and that people have been all accounted for, leading to rescue efforts ending in less than a day.

Rescuers on Wednesday pulled to safety victims of the earthquake, which jolted Jishishan county in Gansu a minute before midnight on Monday, sending many residents in the area out of homes into the cold in the dead of the night. Survivors face uncertainty in the wintry months ahead without permanent shelter amid freezing temperatures.

Many of the affected families are Hui people, an ethnic minority mostly found in western Chinese provinces and regions such as Gansu, Ningxia and Shaanxi.

Pakistan's Imran Khan still barred from vote after conviction appeal fails: Lawyer

REUTERS
KARACHI, PAKISTAN, DEC 21

Pakistani former prime minister Imran Khan remains disqualified from contesting elections after a court rejected his plea to suspend an earlier conviction on Thursday, his lawyer said.

The decision came a day before the deadline to submit nomination papers for elections for provincial and national assemblies that are scheduled for February 8. Khan, a 70-year-old former international cricket star, has been at the centre of a political crisis since he was ousted in a parliamentary no-confidence vote in April 2022.

He was imprisoned on Aug. 5 after being sentenced to three years' jail on charges of unlawfully selling state gifts during his 2018-22 tenure as

prime minister. He denies any wrongdoing and says the charges are politically motivated. Khan was seeking to overturn that conviction, which has barred him from contesting elections for five years.

"Imran Khan's request to suspend the decision in the Tosha Khana criminal case was rejected so that disqualification would remain (in place)," Khan's lawyer and spokesman on legal affairs, Naeem Haider Panjutha, said on X. In another post, he said that Khan's party Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI), would file a challenge of the decision in the Supreme Court on Friday.

In addition to other cases, Khan pleaded not guilty on December 13 to charges of leaking state secrets under an indictment that dealt a further blow to his chances of running again for election.

US, Venezuela swap prisoners: Maduro ally for 10 Americans, plus fugitive contractor 'Fat Leonard'

Maduro celebrates return of Alex Saab as 'triumph for truth' over what he called a US-led campaign of lies.

ASSOCIATED PRESS
MIAMI, DEC 21

The United States freed a close ally of Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro in exchange for the release of 10 Americans imprisoned in the South American country and the return of a fugitive defence contractor known as "Fat Leonard" who is at the centre of a massive Pentagon bribery scandal, the Biden administration announced Wednesday.

The American detainees were back on US soil late Wednesday, White House national security adviser Jake Sullivan said. Six of them arrived at Kelly Airfield Annex in San Antonio.

Savoi Wright, a Californian who had been arrested in Venezuela in October, said, "Free at last, free at last, thank God almighty, free at last" after disembarking the plane.

The deal represents the Biden administration's boldest move yet to improve relations with the major oil-producing nation and extract concessions from the self-proclaimed socialist leader. The largest release of American prisoners in Venezuela's history comes weeks after the White House agreed to suspend some sanctions, following a commitment by Maduro to work toward free and fair conditions for the 2024 presidential election.

Maduro celebrated the return of Alex Saab as a "triumph for truth" over what he called a US-led campaign of lies, threats and torture against someone he considers a Venezuelan diplomat illegally arrested on a US warrant.

"President Biden, we won't be anyone's colony," a defiant Maduro said with Saab at his side for a hero's welcome at the presidential palace. The release of Saab, long regarded by Washington as a bag-



Freed American Edgar Jose Marval Moreno is assisted by medical professionals upon arrival at Kelly Airfield Annex, after he and nine fellow detainees were released in a prisoner swap deal between US and Venezuela, on Wednesday San Antonio, Texas.

man for Maduro, is a significant concession to the Venezuelan leader. Former President Donald Trump's administration held out Saab as a trophy, spending millions of dollars pursuing the Colombian-born businessman, at one point even deploying a Navy warship to the coast of West Africa following his arrest in Cape Verde to ward off a possible escape.

US officials said Biden's decision to grant him clemency was difficult but essential in order to bring home jailed Americans, a core administrative objective that in recent years has resulted in the release of criminals once seen as untradeable.

"These individuals have lost far too much precious time with their loved ones, and their families have suffered every day in their absence. I am grateful that their ordeal is finally over," President

Joe Biden said in a statement.

The agreement also resulted in the return to US custody of Leonard Glenn Francis, the Malaysian owner of a ship-servicing company who is the central character in one of the largest bribery scandals in Pentagon history.

But the exchange angered many in the Venezuelan opposition who have criticised the White House for standing by as Maduro has repeatedly outmanoeuvred Washington after the Trump administration's campaign to topple him failed.

Eyvyn Hernandez, a Los Angeles County public defender arrested almost two years ago along the Colombia-Venezuela border, was one of the US detainees. After arriving in Texas Wednesday night, he thanked Biden "because I know he made a difficult decision that will have a lot of pressure on him

on Capitol Hill. But he got us home and we're with our families. And so we're incredibly grateful, all of us."

Hernandez added, "Honestly, all you think about when you're in prison is how you didn't appreciate being free while you were free."

Wright told reporters: "I didn't know if I would ever make it out. And it's really scary to be in a place where you're used to having freedoms and you're locked into a cell. ... It's a very challenging situation."

In October, the White House eased sanctions on Venezuela's oil industry following promises by Maduro that he would level the playing field for the 2024 election when he's looking to add six years to his decade-long, crisis-ridden rule. A November 30 deadline has passed and so far Maduro has failed to reverse a ban blocking his chief opponent, Maria Corina Machado, from running for office.

Biden told reporters earlier in the day that, so far, Maduro appeared to be "keeping his commitment on a free election." Republicans, echoing the sentiment of many in the US-backed opposition, said Saab's release would only embolden Maduro to continue down an authoritarian path. "Disgraceful decision," Republican Sen.

Marco Rubio of Florida, vice chair of the Senate Intelligence Committee, posted on X, the social media platform formerly known as Twitter.

The White House went to lengths to assure it won't hesitate to snap back sanctions if Venezuela's government fails to fulfil electoral commitments hammered out during negotiations with the opposition. A \$15 million reward seeking Maduro's arrest to face drug trafficking charges in New York also remains in effect, it said.

In Loving Memory

**Wednesday
Oct. 4, 1989
(Navaratri)**

**Wednesday
Dec. 22, 1999
(Purnima)**

"Wings and shiny halos
Travel from on high
Surrounding all their loved ones
They never say good-bye."

JAYAKAR

Dad, Mom, Malika,
Mayanka-Anubhav
Mahika, Sahansh & Sarvaraj

PM CUP WOMEN'S T20

SCOREBOARD

MATCH 1/TU CRICKET GROUND
TOSS: Madhesh, field first.
Bagmati 117-4 (20/20 overs)
Yashoda Bist 47* (39), Asmina Karmacharya 30* (31); Puja Mahato 2-15
Madhesh 89-5 (20/20 overs)
Puja Mahato 35 (45); Asmina Karmacharya 2-18
Bagmati win by 28 runs.
Player of the match: Asmina Karmacharya

MATCH 2/ MULPANI CRICKET STADIUM
TOSS: Sudurpaschim, bat first.
Sudurpaschim 87-9 (20/20 overs)
Kabita Joshi 22 (27); Sonu Khadka 2-24
Armed Police Force 88-1 (16.1/20 overs)
Jyoti Pandey 49* (48), Indu Barma 31* (44)
Armed Police Force win by nine wickets.
Player of the match: Jyoti Pandey

MATCH 3/TU CRICKET GROUND
TOSS: Gandaki, bat first.
Gandaki 102-4 (20/20 overs)
Suman Khatiwada 33* (18), Anjali Bishwokarma 30 (51); Madhu DC 1-12
Lumbini 103-6 (17/20 overs)
Laxmi Chaudhary 42 (44); Shristi Jaisi 2-18
Lumbini win by four wickets.
Player of the match: Laxmi Chaudhary

MATCH 4/MULPANI CRICKET GROUND
TOSS: Karnali, bat first.
Karnali 33-9 (16/16 overs)
Kiran Kunwar 9 (27); Apsari Begam 3-12, Alisha Khadiya 2-3
Koshi 35-0 (3.1/16 overs)
Rubina Chhetry 25 (17)
Koshi win by 10 wickets.
Player of the match: Apsari Begam

PLAYING FRIDAY
Bagmati 9:30, Kirtipur, Koshi
Karnali 9:30, Mulpani, Gandaki
Madhesh 13:15, Kirtipur, APF
Lumbini 13:15, Mulpani, Sudurpaschim

NEPAL SUPER LEAGUE

RESULT
Kathmandu Rayzrs 1-4 Birgunj United
Nkengue Juniors 20' William Opoku Asiedu 45+6, 56, 57, Sunil Khadka 46'

PLAYING FRIDAY
Dhangadhi 13:00 Pokhara Thunders
Jhapa 17:00 Chitwan

STANDINGS
Team P W D L GF GA PT
Pokhara (Q) 7 4 2 1 7 4 14
Dhangadhi 7 3 3 1 7 6 12
Lalitpur 7 2 4 1 7 4 10
Jhapa 7 2 4 1 4 2 10
Kathmandu 7 2 3 2 7 9 9
Birgunj 7 2 2 3 11 10 8
Ilam 8 2 2 4 6 8 8
Butwal 7 2 1 4 5 8 7
Chitwan 7 1 3 3 5 8 6



Birgunj United's William Opoku Asiedu celebrates after scoring a goal against Kathmandu Rayzrs during the Nepal Super League at the Dasharath Stadium in Kathmandu on Thursday.

Birgunj maul Kathmandu to stay in playoff race

William Opoku Asiedu scores a hat-trick in Birgunj's 4-1 drubbing of the defending champions. The win sends Birgunj up to sixth position in the Nepal Super League.

SPORTS BUREAU
KATHMANDU, DEC 21

Birgunj United rekindled their bid to make the playoff stage of the Nepal Super League with a 4-1 shellacking of defending champions Kathmandu Rayzrs at the Dasharath Stadium in Kathmandu on Thursday.

William Opoku Asiedu scored a hat-trick and second-half substitute Sunil Khadka pulled one off for Birgunj as Sanoj Shrestha's side recovered from a one-goal deficit to complete a remarkable comeback that sent them up to sixth position in the table.

Kathmandu were looking to crawl back inside the top four after being dropped to the fifth position following Jhapa's stunning 2-0 victory against Dhangadhi on Wednesday.

It appeared Bal Gopal Maharjan's men would run the show when they took the lead through a lightning counter attack in the 20th minute.

Tijodinov Komiwon was the engineer of the counteroffensive. Kathmandu goalkeeper Anjal Shrestha grabbed a corner and quickly released Komiwon who showed great run to race into the Birgunj half before switching flanks to exploit the opponent defence. Hishub Thapaliya then combined with Dipesh Gurung and Kuldip Karki before setting up Nkengue Juniors with a back heel and the Cameroonian placed the ball into the far corner leaving Deep Karki helpless.

Kathmandu were presented with another golden opportunity to settle the game minutes before the break

when they were awarded a spot kick won by Thapaliya. But Shokhrukh Makhmudkhozhev failed to convert it, courtesy of a brilliant save from Karki.

The miss proved a curse for Kathmandu as Birgunj profited from it to equalise in the sixth minute of added time when they were also awarded a penalty after Andres Nia handled the ball inside the area.

William Opoku stepped up and did not miss.

The recovery suddenly shifted the tide and Birgunj completed the resurgence immediately after the break.

Sunil Khadka was the target man. Obed Osuwu made a well-timed run to find a long pass from Dipenk Raj Singh, fooled Kingue Oliver with a dummy move before shooting from a tight angle. But Anjal gave the ball away and super-sub Khadka took full advantage of the goalkeeping error to poke home and give Birgunj control of the game.

"After we equalised at the death of the first half, our plan was to score a winner because a draw would be fruitless if we were to fight for the top four spot," said Birgunj captain Karki, whose penalty save set the tone for Birgunj to claw their way back into the game. "We scored and more came. The team performed well. Hopefully, we will pull off another win in our last match."

Birgunj were mesmerising throughout the second half, casting spells of their new-found magic and torturing the defending champions.

Birgunj were at the bottom of the

table before Thursday and out of nowhere they were subjugating one of the tournament favourites.

Asiedu then put the icing on the cake adding the third goal of the game in the 56th minute heading in a corner from Sushil Lama.

Kathmandu were shell-shocked and unable to construct a recoup against a team they were supposed to grind down.

And Opoku put the game to bed one minute later with his individual third, dinking a chip over Kathmandu goalkeeper Shrestha, who backtracked but failed to stop the further disaster.

"I was confident I could score today," said Asiedu, who now leads the goal-scoring tally with five goals.

The race for playoffs has now gone down to the wire. The result leaves Kathmandu—on nine points—with a daunting task as they face third-placed Lalitpur City, who will also be looking to confirm their qualification on the final day of group stage. Lalitpur have 10 points.

Jhapa, also on 10 points, have a much easier fixture against Chitwan, who have already been eliminated.

Birgunj have eight points and still have a chance to progress if they win against Butwal Lumbini and other results go in their favour.

So far, Pokhara Thunders are the only team to have confirmed their top-four finish, securing their ticket to the playoffs.

Dhangadhi are second with 12 points but they are still not safe. They face leaders Pokhara in a tricky fixture on Friday.

What does the European Super League verdict mean for football?

REUTERS
LONDON, DEC 21

The European Court of Justice ruled on Thursday that European football's governing body UEFA and its global counterpart FIFA breached EU law when they prevented 12 clubs from forming a European Super League (ESL).

What is the European Super League?

Real Madrid, Barcelona and Juventus plus nine other European major clubs announced the breakaway ESL—a closed league—in April 2021.

Sports development company A22 assisted with creating the ESL. But the move collapsed within 48 hours

after an outcry from fans, governments and players forced Manchester United, Liverpool, Manchester City, Chelsea, Tottenham Hotspur, Arsenal, AC Milan, Inter Milan and Atletico Madrid to pull out.

What was ESL's case against UEFA? A22 CEO Bernd Reichart said the ESL wanted to break what he described was a monopoly of competitions run by UEFA, which has organised European competitions for nearly 70 years and sees the ESL as a significant threat.

When the breakaway clubs were threatened with sanctions, the ESL went to court claiming that UEFA and FIFA held a monopoly position which was in breach of the European Union's

Competition and Free Movement Law.

Despite nine clubs pulling out, the three holdouts—Real Madrid, Barcelona and Juventus—still hoped to get the ESL up and running. However, Juventus opted to pull out earlier this year when the Italian club's board changed.

Real and Barca took the case to a Spanish court, which subsequently sought guidance from the Luxembourg-based European Court.

What was the European court of justice verdict?

The court said UEFA and FIFA contravened EU law by preventing the formation of a Super League and that they abused their dominant position by forbidding clubs to

compete in the ESL.

The court said that both regulating and organising sporting competitions was not an infringement of EU competition law and that sports federations can refuse third parties access to the market, but only if the refusal is justified by genuine objectives.

The court's ruling said both bodies must "comply with the competition rules and respect the freedoms of movement", adding that their rules on approval, control and sanctions amounted to unjustified restrictions on the freedom to provide services.

However, the court said the judgement did not necessarily mean the ESL project must be approved. That is for the Spanish court to decide.

What does the ruling mean for football?

The verdict means European clubs can join another continental league—without the threat of sanctions—instead of playing in competitions run solely by UEFA. However, there is no guarantee the Premier League clubs will sign up for the new competition.

Two months after the six English clubs pulled out of the project in 2021, they said they would pay a combined 22 million pounds (\$27.78 million) as "a gesture of goodwill".

They face a 30-point deduction if they attempt a similar move in future while the Premier League also said they would each be fined 25 million pounds if they attempt another breakaway.

HOROSCOPE

ARIES (March 21-April 19)
Luck and gratitude go hand in hand, dearest Aries, nudging you to appreciate what you have without losing sight of where you're headed. Remember that patience is a virtue as you work toward prosperous goals, being mindful of your worth.
TAURUS (April 20-May 20)
Things will go your way today, dear Taurus. Go big within all your ambitions, finding the bravery to invest fully in what you desire most. Be mindful to appreciate the accomplishments that lead you this far if you need extra motivation to charge forward.
GEMINI (May 21-June 21)
Positive internal dialogues lead to enlightenment this morning, dearest Gemini. Though you may require solitude to sort out deep or convoluted thoughts and feelings, you'll benefit from time alone with your spirituality.

CANCER (June 22-July 22)
Don't be afraid to invest in new social frontiers this morning, dear Cancer. This cosmic climate improves your networking skills, especially when you approach fresh dynamics from a grounded and authentic disposition.
LEO (July 23-August 22)
Growth comes where responsibility is demonstrated this morning. Don't be afraid to push against barriers, both internal and external, trusting that you have the power to shatter glass ceilings. Edit your work to see errors you overlooked earlier.
VIRGO (August 23-September 22)
Your wisdom increases under these cosmic conditions as well, especially when you take time to slow down and appreciate the beauty that fills each day. Your creative instincts heighten as, creating an environment perfect for artistic pursuits.

LIBRA (September 23-October 22)
Lean into the dynamics that help you feel safe, pulling away from those who do not. Make choices that prioritise your overall well-being, even if doing so leads to a few farewells. Emotional and mental clarity will find you today.
SCORPIO (October 23-November 21)
Set aside disappointments, personal hang-ups and stoic dispositions. People may surprise you if you give them a chance to prove their loyalty and love. You could find yourself circling back to conversations that happened earlier in the month.
SAGITTARIUS (November 22-December 21)
Focus on nurturing yourself and healing wounds, dear Archer. This cosmic climate also encourages sharing with someone you can trust, reminding you that you do not have to traverse darkness alone. Avoid nitpicking yourself or others.

CAPRICORN (December 22-January 19)
Invest in your creative dreams, dearest Sea-Goat, offering luck when you express yourself authentically and artistically. This cosmic climate is also great for nurturing friendships, especially ones that are supportive and offer joy. Choose your words wisely.
AQUARIUS (January 20-February 18)
You'll feel stable, energised, and optimistic this morning, dear Aquarius, thanks to a sweet alliance. You'll find satisfaction in nurturing loved ones through sweet gestures and acts of kindness, and the cosiness of home will be difficult to resist.
PISCES (February 19-March 20)
Your positivity will be infectious, dear Pisces, nudging you to be generous in spirit. Lean into these vibes by maintaining an optimistic outlook and craft your message accordingly. Old acquaintances may reemerge just before afternoon rolls in.

Astrology.com

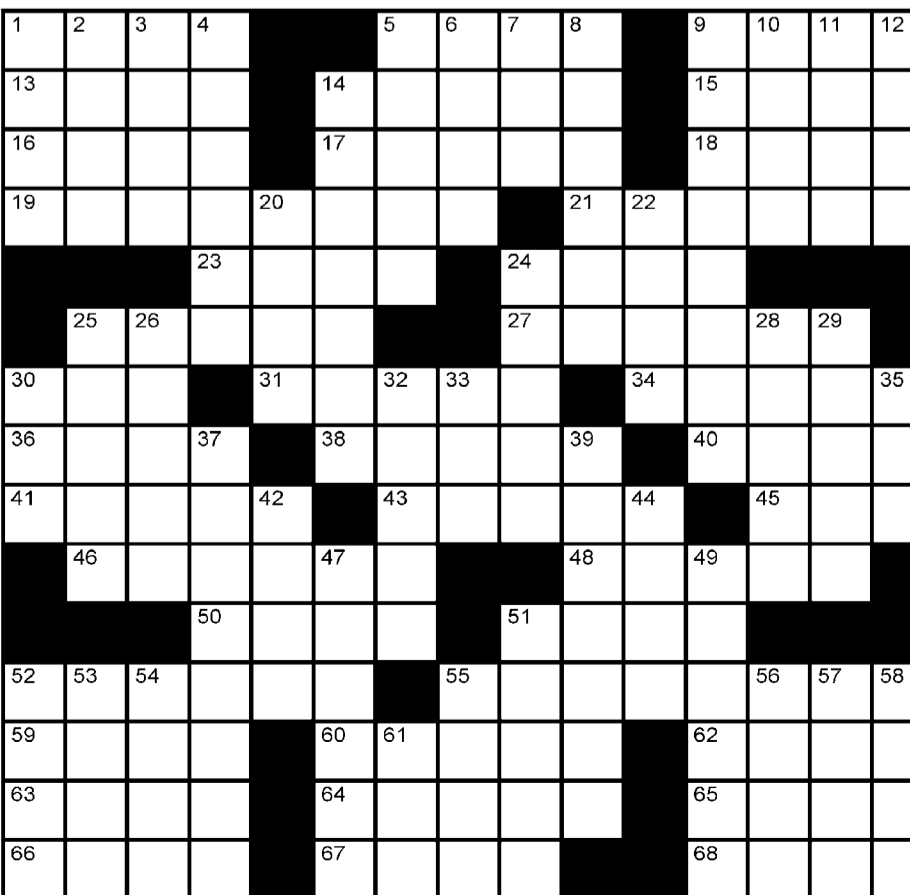
CROSSWORD

- ACROSS
1 Dollop
5 Weakens
9 Major
13 Cookie brand
14 Stop momentarily
15 Inferior
16 Gets on in years
17 "Kate & ..."
18 Diner's preference
19 In chains
21 Inventor Edison
23 Test
24 Buckeyes' state
25 Esprit de ...
27 Mild
30 Badly
31 Flowed slowly
34 Sandwich shops
36 Commotion (hyph.)
38 Resided
40 Florida county
41 Churns
43 Hawaiian porch
45 Gull
46 Feverish
48 Grinding tooth
50 "Quiet!"
51 Brit's parting word (hyph.)
52 Some cars
55 Tendon cousin
59 State
60 Application
62 French cheese
63 "All You — Is Love"
64 Like some seals
65 Wine and —
66 Tips
67 Top performer
68 High cards
DOWN
1 Bready mass
2 Compulsion
3 Come together
4 Wall hanging
5 Oregon's capital
6 New Year's word
7 Greek letter
8 Boil
9 Displaced
10 Go here and there
11 Wetlands bird
12 War personified
14 Sunshade
20 World's fair
22 Back
24 Poet — Nash
25 Fabric
26 Hit song from years past
28 Beast of burden
29 Duck
30 "— a Wonderful Life"
32 Nothing
33 Actress — Gabor
35 Stitch
37 Apple farms
39 Hurt
42 Shock
44 Least little bit
47 Publishes
49 Greek consonant
51 Big cat
52 Rational
53 Divisible by two
54 Act
55 Pasternak character
56 Actor — Idle
57 Workday's start
58 Casual tops
61 Roosted

PREVIOUS PUZZLE SOLVED



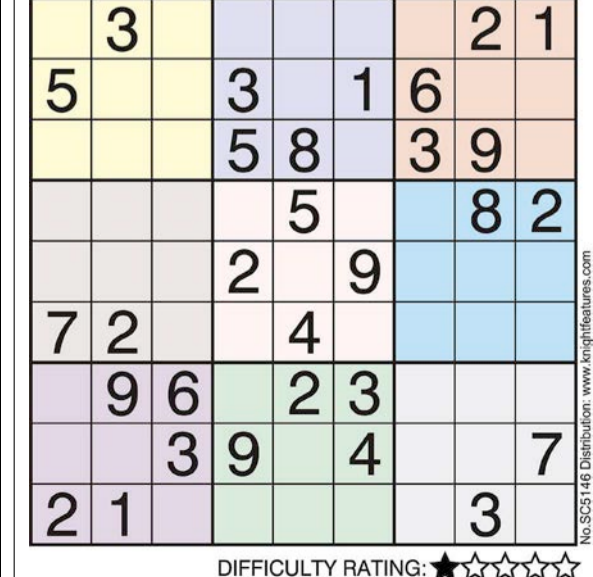
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SUDOKU



YESTERDAY'S SOLUTION



DIFFICULTY RATING: ★☆☆☆☆

Why you should watch 'The Railway Men'

The miniseries focuses on the Indian Railways' handling of the Bhopal 1984 gas leak that took over 4,000 innocent lives.



SCREENGRAB VIA YOUTUBE

MANUSHREE MAHAT
KATHMANDU

On the nights of December 2 and 3, 1984, a tragic event unfolded—the Bhopal Gas leak, the largest industrial disaster in history. Immediate casualties numbered at least 3,800, with over 15,000 deaths in the following years. The aftermath left 558,125 people with permanent injuries and disabilities, as stated in the official government affidavit.

The Bhopal Gas Leak stands as a stark example of tragedy and injustice driven by corporate greed and governmental instability. In one night, thousands lost their lives, and the repercussions persist for thousands more. The compensation paid by Union Carbide Corporation (UCC), the responsible company, was \$470 million—a meagre amount considering the severe consequences suffered by victims. Thirty-nine years on, the horrors endure.

This reality, albeit dramatised, is conveyed by 'The Railway Men', directed by Shiv Rawail in its four-episode miniseries. It depicts the heroic efforts of railway staff, corporate irresponsibility and governmental inaction. The narrative unfolds like a dystopian drama, akin to the Korean film 'Train to Busan' or the historical drama 'Chernobyl'. Ghulam Dastagir, deputy station master of Bhopal Railway Station, is fictionalised as Iftekar Siddiqui (Kay Kay Menon). The story also revolves around Imad Riaz (Babil Khan), a newly hired loco-pilot and former truck



The Railway Men

Director: Shiv Rawail
Cast: Kay Kay Menon, R Madhavan, Divyendu, Babil Khan
Year: 2023
Episodes: 4
Language: Hindi
Available on: Netflix

driver for Union Carbide, fired for protesting its hazardous working conditions after his friend's death.

Negligence is a key factor in the gas leak, and from the outset, 'The Railway Men' highlights Union Carbide India Limited (UCIL)'s disregard for maintaining a safe system in its factories and training workers to handle potent chemicals like methyl isocyanate (MIC). As Imad describes MIC as a liquid dynamite, it becomes evident that factory workers lack knowledge of handling the systems and chemicals, and safety is compromised with the non-functioning flare tower. The series introduces Jagmohan Kumawat (Sunny Hinduja), a committed reporter with a 'nothing-to-lose' mindset, aiming to expose the Union Carbide factory. Balwant Yadav (Divyendu), a wanted bandit posing as a crude constable, focuses on stealing money from the railway locker despite the chaos in the city due to the gas leak.

In the first episode, the series pieces together the puzzle, leading to the group's bad luck. Led by Iftekar Siddiqui, they try to find a safe way out of the gas. The gas leak, combined with the Bhopal Railway's communication line going down, leaves people stranded with no means to call for help. Siddiqui, portrayed by Menon as a protective and responsible figure, is more concerned about the passengers on the next train, Gorakhpur Express, potentially being exposed to the gas. Menon's portrayal cap-

tures Siddiqui's soulful understanding of trauma and fear, evident in his eyes as characters don makeshift masks to protect themselves from the gas. The burden of responsibility weighs heavily on Siddiqui as he strives to save the people on the railway, emphasising, "These people are our responsibility."

Babil Khan, playing Imad Riaz, channels the beaten-down frustration of a young man responsible for his family, residing near the factory. Riaz, familiar with tragedy, handles loss matter-of-factly, expressing the instinct to protect. He joins forces with Siddiqui to lead people to safety, showing his commitment with lines like, "Mother is dead, sir. She lived metres away from the factory. Don't worry, I'm not going anywhere."

Among these notable figures is Balwant Yadav, referred to as 'constable' by Siddiqui, who arrives at Bhopal station with the intent to steal from the stationmaster's locker. As we observe Yadav, there is hope that Siddiqui's trust and repeated use of 'constable' might transform him into a protector. However, this hope remains futile until the last episode. Divyendu's portrayal of Yadav is entertaining as the crude and sly thief who occasionally quashes the antics of desperate survivors on the station. However, his character feels redundant at times. The parallel storyline of his attempts to steal the locker, running alongside Siddiqui's efforts to save everyone, seems out of place. It appears more like a plot device to maintain excitement, which is already inherent in the story.

The year 1984 witnessed multiple tragedies in India, including the anti-Sikh riots, causing an estimated 8,000 deaths. Director Rawail intertwines this dark part of history with the bravery of railway officers in saving lives. While Siddiqui focuses on saving lives in Bhopal, Raghuraj Yadav, as a train guard, selflessly protects Sikh passengers in the Gorakhpur Express train, namely Rajbir Kaur (Mandira Bedi) and her son, from a group of rioters. Although it might seem that too many storylines are running in parallel, the anti-Sikh riots not only shed light

Albeit dramatised, details of the tragic event are portrayed well in the four episodes.

on a grim chapter in India's history but also seamlessly connect with Siddiqui's and Rati Pandey's (R Madhavan) efforts to prevent more deaths.

R Madhavan, appearing alongside Kay Kay Menon in the opening credits, is the last of the main characters to appear on-screen in the second episode as Rati Pandey, the General Manager of Central Railways. Madhavan portrays Pandey with an authoritative yet non-menacing demeanour, swiftly addressing the gas leak that endangers Bhopal. Pandey joins the selfless heroics of Siddiqui and Riaz, rallying railway staff to send relief to Bhopal despite orders from the railway ministry not to do so.

The series sheds light on government inaction and bureaucracy through the character Rajeshwori Janglay (Juhi Chawla). Tied to the politics, she attempts to send help to the victims and survivors. Her perspective reveals the government's inability to handle a disaster of this scale and the indifferent politics that allowed the release of Warren Anderson, the chairman of UCIL, to the US without facing the consequences. In the series, Anderson, played as Madsen, the American head of UCIL, by Philip Rosch, embodies the sociopathy associated with those unwilling to admit culpability in such a tragedy.

The experience of watching 'The Railway Men' is enhanced by exceptional cinematography and faithful production design. The art director and production designer, Rajat Podder, shared in an article with Scroll.in that they built the Bhopal railway station from scratch due to the unavailability of a real station matching the time's design. The compact railway stations, attention to detail in surroundings, the stationmaster's room, the Union Carbide interior with pipes and chemical fumes, and the slums in Bhopal are crafted to convey the catastrophic events realistically.

The series incorporates photographs from the tragic day to maintain accuracy. Skillfully, Kumawat, the reporter, enters a hospital filled with patients and captures images of the harrowing day, which is juxtaposed with real-life images. The decision to graphically represent the

movement of trains on the screen is a sophisticated choice.

'The Railway Men' is a story with high emotional stakes, offering depth to characters in various settings. Aayush Gupta, the show's writer, provides backstories for minor and supporting characters, intensifying the impact as the consequences of the leak unfold. In the station, a group of young swimmers discusses their recent championship loss, ultimately saving Sohini, a newlywed bride and the sole survivor of her wedding party. On the Gorakhpur Express train, Shazia, the widow of Riaz's friend, travels with her young daughter and newborn, holding out hope of meeting Riaz at the other end. In the

slums, we are introduced to Kamruddin (Divyendu Bhattacharya), a Union Carbide manager, and his pregnant wife, Nafisa (Bhumika Dube), who, while envisioning a better future for their family, assist Kumawat in uncovering Union Carbide's negligence.

The impact on ordinary lives evokes anger as the CEO of Union Carbide faces minimal consequences, leaving people to grapple with long-term effects. This isn't the sole instance of administrative failure causing such disasters—the 2013 Rana Plaza collapse in Dhaka is another example where many lives could have been saved with proper care from the administration.

More distressing is that victims continue to suffer from the leak's consequences. The miniseries depicts many victims left paralysed, children born with defects to pregnant women at the time, and ongoing generational fertility issues and pregnancy loss. Additionally, groundwater contamination from the factory's chemical wastes remains a threat to lives. Recent studies also highlight a higher likelihood of cancer in men born up to 100 km from the gas leak.

'The Railway Men' provides emotional reprieve by completing the character arcs of the main characters, yet it also reveals the lasting impacts of the disaster. There is no happy ending for the victims still seeking retribution.



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